

3.1.23

Good morning!

I'm writing as a long-time prisoner advocate to strongly support the clear and important language currently proposed by Representative Dave Pinto in HF1233, which has a hearing this Thursday at 10:30am. As part of an organization of incarcerated people and their loved ones, we believe strip searches and solitary confinement should and must be ended in juvenile and adult facilities.

As part of the Twin Cities Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC), I have been a part of an ongoing struggle over strip searches at Shakopee prison¹ as there was a wave of 5 reported staff on prisoner sexual assaults last year, all of women of color, the first of which got this news coverage² and can be heard in this action alert³. The incident happened in solitary confinement. Sadly, such abuse of women in Shakopee is a practice that has been going on for decades⁴ as seen by this incomplete history compiled by currently incarcerated women in partnership with IWOC. I know adult women who have been stripped over 50 times in an 8 month period, and over 5 times in one day.

If this happens to adult women, imagine what happens to juveniles. If adult women are disbelieved, retaliated against, and intimidated into silence, imagine what happens to juveniles. And ask why we allow this. We strongly believe there should be NO strip searches in prisons when there are body scanners and metal detectors capable of doing so. We also have not seen solitary confinement create safety, nor the DOC institute basic parameters to ensure that people are not placed in dangerous situations, which result in solitary, motivating HF1612 a first step bill by Representative Frieberg⁵.

We as a state have passed laws against the sexual and physical assault of minors, and of adults. We should expect the same of our facilities of justice. Juvenile facilities are a good place to start but 8000 thousand incarcerated people hope we go beyond them, immediately. We see that our facilities do not protect people from actual sexual assault, retaliate against them for reporting, and contribute to regular institutional sexual assault by strip searches. With the overlapping issue of jail deaths we have seen that the DOC has absolutely failed to properly enforce humane standards and data collection practices on county facilities through licensing and it is absolutely appropriate for the legislature to be ensuring they do so.

The growing body of national research on the sexual assault to prison pipeline⁶ makes these issues all the more important, and strip searches are generally considered sexual assault. While there is much to uncover about similar links with men and boys and men, anecdotal evidence is strong and should not be ignored. The sexual assault to prison pipeline is starting to be clearly documented in Minnesota, as seen for example in this recent report from Violence Free Minnesota⁷, commissioned by the MN DOC.

Again and again at Shakopee prison we see how strip searches are a form of victimization and sexual assault. How they are a tool used to abuse adult women, how they spin people out mentally, for days or weeks, sometimes resulting in solitary confinement and further strip searches, mental damage, and even self harm. About how requiring strip searches prior to visiting and medical care prevents people from seeing loved ones in visiting or accessing outside medical care -- both essential to short term and long term success. Strip searches also directly contribute to an ongoing culture of harassment, intimidation, sexual favors, and impunity that characterize Shakopee prison according to those who have and are currently held in prison there.

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www.startribune.com/strip-searches-shakopee-prison-body-searches-body-scans-incarceration-womens-prison/60024949/0/

²www.mprnews.org/episode/2022/06/23/conversation-on-prison-safety-following-alleged-assault-at-shakopee-correctional-facility

³ <http://tinyurl.com/justice4angela>

⁴ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1PMYP8thq54MRKJyMwMSqayAV7Reg2iDMW6zcx9_La-w/edit?usp=sharing

⁵ www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=HF1612&version=0&session=ls93&session_year=2023&session_number=0

⁶ https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/SAPP-UPDATED-SEPT-2020_Final-3-1.pdf

⁷ https://www.vfmn.org/_files/ugd/f4bdb8_15e146e352924cb3abdca109e1c46b5b.pdf

Representative Dave Pinto is a prosecutor and has wisely put forward clear language that does not allow people in power to abuse it. As we all know, when we allow loopholes they become normal practice and people's well meaning policy goals become meaningless. This is the case for the so-called solitary confinement reform in the MN DOC over the years -- do not allow that to be the case for our children. And please look at what we are doing to our parents.

We know that creating abusive conditions creates abuse and I ask you to think about what can and does happen when people are put alone in rooms with guards, left in isolation for weeks, months, and years, or when they are strip searched whenever they are taken into a new facility, sent to holding, sent to solitary, or sent to medical or off grounds.

Finally please hear what women in prison are reporting, copied from our **October 2022 Report to the Taskforce on Incarcerated Women and Girls**. This is the tip of the iceberg, compiled in a one month period and should merit hearings in the facility itself. Again, if we accept this for adults, what are we doing to our children?

- *A woman reports a white woman being strip searched on the way to the hospital -- while unconscious. Apparently guards were told she couldn't be put in the ambulance until she was strip searched first.*
- *A Black woman reports that she was forced to strip for a medical procedure with a male guard present, a clear form of institutional sexual assault. She has reported and is facing retaliation*
- *Another woman was recently strip searched both before leaving the hospital after an extensive surgery and then AGAIN after returning to the facility, the body scanner was not used instead*
- *We have also gotten reports of certain lesbian guards being suggestive during strip searches or bragging afterwards in a sexual way about overseeing them, there has been no meaningful responses to grievances of this kind*
- *There have been multiple other concerns of PREA rules⁸ not being followed, of retaliation against those that report, and not appropriately housing survivors -- we will follow up if more becomes public*

What it's like to be strip searched: *One woman wanted to give you the picture of what a strip search means, exactly, for those of you who haven't had to undergo one. Her message, below:*

"Any time one of us has an off grounds medical appointment we are called to intake to be transported. Two female officers follow us into a holding cell and leave the door wide open.

We have to remove all our clothes one at a time and hand them over. While standing there completely naked we have to pull out our tampon if we have one in. While bleeding on the floor (They make comments like we've seen it before. Keep in mind I have a documented medical condition where I have excessive bleeding) Also if you have a pad you also remove that and shake out your underwear.

Then you shake out your hair (so your hair is a mess at your appointment, you can not brush or comb it making us feel less than). Show behind each ear, pull your lips over your gums, show the inside of your mouth. Lift your breasts, lift your stomach, turn around lift one foot at a time and wiggle your toes. Squat down to the ground three times coughing each time. Then you can put your underwear back on and get dressed in all orange.

You can have a pad but not a tampon and not both if you ask. Please note this before you even go. We were also all searched when we got here, why this is standard operating procedure I do not understand. When I asked why all this before we go to the Doctor I was told because this is the way we do it. I believe it is a humiliation practice put in place to discourage people from pursuing their medical needs.

Now wearing all orange here come the restraints. They not only cuff us but they put this square box over the chain between the cuffs to hold them in place (this box hurts so bad it leaves cuff marks for 8+ hours after it is removed and soreness for 3 days, no exaggeration) The box attaches to a chain they wrap around your waist then padlock. Then the ankle irons. Then you leave the intake area, get in the vehicle, and go to the appointment. At all times you have two officers with you. You are NOT out of their sight at all. They remain in the room no matter what even if you have to use the bathroom at least one will go in with you and watch you. When you return from the appointment you have the same procedure but in reverse.

They only used the scanner on me when I first got here and they still strip searched me anyways. I could complain more about it believe me. It sucks but I will stop myself there. I just wanted you to have the complete process. Share it absolutely!! Take care."

If you have any questions I am always available for conversation at dboehnke@gmail.com or 651-315-4222, or IWOC can be contacted at tc.iwoc@gmail.com.

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